

Jerry Lee Lewis  
By: Dave Hoekstra  
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LAS VEGAS Those crazy arms are spread in a crucifix position, a weathered face appears to be sculpted from soft wax, and the wave still wanders through a wild head of hair.

Jerry Lee Lewis looks like a religious relic begging to be bought. You'd be proud to have him on the dashboard Saturday night, but you wouldn't show him to Mama on Sunday morning.

It's opening night for Jerry Lee Lewis and Fats Domino at Bally's Resort here, and the Killer has just completed an uninhibited 45-minute set. He's in extremely good spirits in his dressing room after the show, regaling with stories of cocaine (he said he's never tried it), whiskey (he has been known to sip it) and women (he's on his sixth marriage). His audience includes his wife, Kerrie; new manager, Jerry Schilling, and a reporter.

Jerry Lee Lewis is living rock 'n' roll, exhaling and inhaling every note like an imposing Arnold Schwarzenegger character coming in from the dark.

At age 52, Lewis still plays piano with emotional abandon and religious passion. He straps the listener into one of his schizophrenic solos as if it were a two-minute tilt-a-whirl ride - and he's the creepy guy at the controls. Jerry Lee Lewis is dangerous, and people forget that's the essence of rock 'n' roll.

Technically, Lewis parlays tension for all that it is worth. His most successful marriage has been between a resolute Southern boogie on piano and his country alleycat howl.

But the greatest reality is that Jerry Lee Lewis' music cannot be separated from his soul.

"You're right, it's strictly from the soul inside and it's very deep," Lewis says while relaxing on his dressing-room sofa. "To find that is a talent within itself and it is something no man can teach you. It's a God-given talent and it's my own style. My folks bought me a piano when I was 9 years old, and I taught myself to play. I created my style and nobody can take it away from me."

Lewis, who rarely grants interviews, is in a fun-loving mood that swings between sincere and mock-surlly. Sometimes you can't be too sure. In the Nick Tosches book, *Country*, he wrote of a 1973 incident when Lewis took a broken

beer bottle to the neck of a reporter who asked an impertinent question.

Like most Southern rock 'n' roll icons, Lewis displays a chilling correlation between the pervasive spirit of church and the naked intensity of his music. Lewis was raised in a Pentecostal church in Ferriday, La., where he occasionally played gospel piano. After high school, he attended a fundamentalist Bible college in Texas. His cousin is Jimmy Swaggart. They grew up together in Ferriday.

"What are we trying to get into here?" Lewis snarls. "Religion, salvation or (deleted)? If you want to talk about religion, I can tell you facts. There's no such thing as religion. There's no word in the Bible about religion.

"It's salvation and sanctification.

"Is someone sanctified or is he just kind of one these Baptist folks?" Lewis asks. "Like Jimmy (Swaggart). What happened to him, I don't know. He preached brimstone, hellfire and damnation until he stood upside the wall and then we find out he was perverted. I could have told him that when he was born. Awh, he condemned himself too big, and he put himself in a position and then looks at a little ol' girl with her dress up. My God. In that case, I've had it. That's ridiculous."

I ask Lewis about the Baton Rouge thing - when Swaggart pulled Lewis offstage in front of 5,000 people during a 1979 concert in that city.

"He really has a good deal going . . . what thing?"

The Baton Rouge thing.

"Oh, yeah, he came and got me off the stage one time," Lewis says. "I went along with that game. I thought maybe he wanted to give me some money. I was drinking pretty good, yes. But I was doing my show. One of my wives I had then told Jimmy that I was really messed up big time. So here comes Jimmy, getting me off the stage. I was doing 'Meat Man,' and I look around and there's Jimmy Swaggart."

Lewis stops the story and laughs in deep tones that echo the piercing bass lines on his piano.

"I go, 'Jimmy, what are you doing here?' and he says, 'Let's go, pal.' I asked him if he was crazy. So he took me on his plane, took me to his home and preached to me about a week. He checked me out because he thought I was really heavy on dope. I just lay there and watched television. Then I went home to the screwy wife I had and went back to work. And I guess Jimmy went on and got perverted.

"Perverted or converted."

A converted drummer's soul beats beneath Jerry Lee Lewis. Few people realize Lewis began his musical career as a drummer, a fact that former Sun Records engineer Jack Clement mentioned during a 1986 interview in Nashville.

"What Jerry was doing in Ferriday was playing drums with his left hand and piano with his right," Clement recalled. "The only other guy in the band was a bass player. That was his act then, and it was something."

Clement is credited with discovering Lewis at Sun Records after Lewis egged his way to Memphis.

Lewis reminisces, "Me and my daddy sold eggs so I could get to Memphis. We were pulling corn one day out in the field, and I told him I was reading in this magazine about a guy called Sam Phillips (Sun Records founder) who got Elvis started. I told him I wanted to save some money, check him (Phillips) out and get me a record. My dad said he didn't blame me. We didn't have any money. So we saved up 30 dozen eggs and sold them."

Clement will never forget the day Lewis walked into the studio. "I was doing nothing in the control room, and the receptionist comes back and tells me there's a guy here who says he plays piano like (guitarist) Chet Atkins," Clement said in 1986. "Well, I was a big Chet Atkins fan. Sure enough, he played like Chet. So I asked him to sing, and he was great, but it was real, real country. I loved it, but the bottom was ready to drop out of country. I asked if he did any rock 'n' roll. He said no, but he would work something up and he went back to Ferriday."

Lewis was cast in the shadow of Elvis Presley at Sun, and it remains that way even in the hot Las Vegas desert. Down at the other end of the strip, at the Hilton Hotel, the extravagant "Elvis: An American Musical" is playing to crowds nightly.

The Elvis image still stings Lewis. The rivalry between the King and the Killer grew so intense that in 1976, Lewis was arrested for disorderly conduct after reportedly waving a pistol and throwing a champagne bottle from the window of his Lincoln in a futile attempt to wake Elvis up in the middle of the night.

Lewis coyly acknowledges the King's everlasting presence in Vegas. "I saw the billboards coming in, but I didn't say nothing," he says. "I didn't know what it was. I didn't know if Elvis came back alive or what."

A trustee of Presley's estate, Schilling walks in the dressing room and

tells Lewis he wants him to see the Elvis musical and that he will be impressed.

"You don't want to make me mad, now," Lewis says. "Me and Elvis could be REAL temperamental."

Lewis is prominently featured in two portions of the two-hour musical. Toward the end of the first act, a black-and-white film depicting a frantic Lewis pounding away at the piano is shown, and at the show's end, a collage of rock 'n' roll stars is centered by a big portrait of Presley. Directly underneath Presley is a smaller picture of Jerry Lee Lewis.

"What are they talking about?" he growls. "They buried Elvis. I went to his funeral. That's (deleted). That's probably just Mr. Parker sticking up for Elvis like he always did. That was his boy - he managed him and they buried him, too. But they ain't buried Jerry Lee Lewis.

"And they've tried to do that lots of times."

That surly attitude has continued to pump life into the Killer. Lewis' wild life has been well-documented: His third marriage was to his 13-year-old cousin, Myra Gale, which stopped his career dead in its tracks when her age was made public in 1958. Two of Lewis' sons have died in accidents; two of his wives have died suddenly: His fourth wife, Jaren Lewis, drowned in a swimming pool in June, 1982, and his fifth wife, Shawn Michelle Lewis, died from a methadone overdose in August, 1983. The Killer himself has spent time on the critical list with bleeding ulcers and a storied history of alcohol and drug abuse.

And he has been "The Killer" since he was a kid.

"All the childhood friends I grew up with somehow or another always called each other killer, killer," Lewis says. "Then, when I cut 'Chantilly Lace,' I just happened to say, 'Hey, this is the Killer speaking.' They branded me with that name. It's a pretty deep name, isn't it? . . . Musically speaking . . . Killer . . . I don't believe in killing anybody. I never killed nobody in my life. Ain't no way you could get Jerry Lee Lewis to kill nobody."

With his wife and manager looking after him, Lewis appears to be more appreciative of his surroundings. Currently, foremost in his career is the Orion film "Great Balls of Fire," which will star Dennis Quaid as Lewis and focus on his life between 1956 and 1958. The release date is up in the air because of the writers' strike, although five months of filming in Memphis still is being planned.

"They're finally beginning to get the movie together," says Lewis, who is a

creative consultant on the film. "I was beginning to think they were going to wait until I died."

Quaid was scheduled to see Lewis' set at Bally's and meet with the Killer, although Lewis' first choice to play him remains Mickey Rourke. "We picked him first, nothing happened and he got disgusted and gave up," Lewis says. "He's the one I would choose. He's something else, isn't he?"

The evening before he opened in Las Vegas, Lewis was in Los Angeles to begin work on the soundtrack of "Great Balls of Fire" with T-Bone Burnett. Lewis says he was taken to dinner when he thought he was going to the studio and that miffed him.

"I pace myself to do certain things, and I lay it down right," Lewis says. "I am what I am. I gear myself for it and I don't like people who beat around the bush and play head games. That bugs me."

Burnett got Lewis in a studio within 45 minutes.

"So I get in the studio and there are three musicians I've never seen before in my life," Lewis says. "I was asked if I could capture the old sound. They had doubts in their minds if I could do these songs again! 'Great Balls of Fire.' 'Crazy Arms.' 'Wild Child.' I said, 'Yes, on one take I can beat it.' They looked at me like I was crazy. To me, my music is my life. I've never done a bad record. I'm dead serious about my music, my singing, my showmanship. And the session came out fantastic."

Lewis' set at Bally's ranged from the lonely country of Hank Williams' "You Win Again" to his rockabilly reading of the Big Bopper's "Chantilly Lace." After the song, Lewis told the standing-room-only crowd, "I love livin' and givin', and if givin' gets me to heaven, I can't miss." He then played a stinging country-politan version of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."

I ask Lewis if he ever reflects on the stars he has outdistanced: Elvis, Eddie Cochran, Buddy Holly, Hank Williams, Gene Vincent, the Big Bopper. . .

"I do a lot of thinking about it," he says. "These people were real close friends. Even Elvis Presley. I know Elvis wouldn't have anything to do with this (musical). He's continuously being used. But that's his game - he chose that life. I always told him to be like me. And he tried, but he just wasn't happy. He'd say, 'Jerry Lee, somebody's going to shoot you one of these days in one of these places.' They haven't yet."

I tell Lewis I remember reading that he said he would drag his audience to hell with him.

"That's a (deleted) lie," he says. "How are you going to take anybody where they're already at? That's ridiculous, putting a load on my shoulders like that.

"If I've got that much strength, I must be Satan."